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May 20, 2008

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County supervisors oppose state transportation sales tax proposal

By: Donna Rescorla, The Independent
05/16/2008

HOLBROOK - A proposed one cent sales tax for transportation is "not a good plan for our county," Public Works Director Dusty Parsons told the Navajo County Board of Supervisors at a May 6 meeting.

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A group called the Transportation and Infrastructure Moving Arizona Economy (TIME) Coalition is proposing an initiative which proposes the sales tax for transportation purposes in Arizona. Background material states that the initiative in Navajo County would generate about \$12 million per year or \$360 million over 30 years. However, the county would only get back an estimated \$173 million, or less than 50 percent of the tax collected. Supervisors were told Apache County would also have the same deficient ration. In the proposal, the largest amount of money, by far, would go to Maricopa County.

"I'm not sure this is an appropriate action for this county," Parson said before turning the presentation over to Jack Husted, transportation liaison for the White Mountain Regional Transportation Committee.

"Over the past two weeks, I've gone from an executive board member (of TIME) to a person non grata," Husted said. "It had been the intent to take the governor's plan and tweak it, but that didn't happen."

Studies were done to determine what kind of taxes might be needed. Last fall, officials decided a plan was needed to get the issue on the 208 ballot. Planners were asked to put together a needs assessment for state highways.

"The first plan wasn't bad," he said. "But there have been changes. I-40 is not involved. The part for highway projects is no longer 60 percent. Now it's 55 percent with 49 percent of that going to Maricopa County and all the other counties sharing the rest."

Husted said the county should demand their tax funds come back to help with its roads.

Although the ADOT board is charged with setting state transportation priorities, they weren't consulted on this proposal, he said. It will have no input on the allocation of this specific transportation funding for the next 30 years.

Husted, who said he earlier presented the same information to Apache County supervisors, listed the various allocations to be funded by the sales tax. Besides the 55 percent for strategic highway projects, it includes 18 percent on rail and transit projects, \$400 million for Maricopa County and \$600 million for Pima County. Another 20 percent would go for local mobility projects and programs, where, again, Maricopa County would receive the majority of funds.

Sixty percent of that 20 percent would go to it with 38 percent allocated for Pima County and the 13 other counties. Of the 38 percent, Pima County would receive 39 percent and the rest of the counties, 61 percent, meaning the 13 counties would receive only 4.64 percent of the total allocations. The tribes would share two percent for their local mobility projects and programs. Four percent will go for transportation enhancements with the final three percent allocated to open space conservation and wildlife habitat.

Husted said that although more than \$1 billion is earmarked for open spaces and wildlife habitat, neither Game and Fish Commission or its director were consulted on the amount, need or appropriate use of the funds.

"This money could be bonded immediately and spent before the governor leaves office," he said. "This would be the governor's legacy."

"I can't tell you what you should do, but if we're collecting taxes, it will be a bad idea to be a donor for trains and highways in Maricopa County or to be used for wildlife conservation. We still have critical needs and there is no funding for maintenance. We're no better off, but we'll have another tax."

Supervisor David Tenney thanked Husted for attending the meetings and said, "It's obvious to me this is not good the way it is protected. Arizona is a donor state in many federal programs, and I don't see the counties becoming donors for the governor's legacy."

Husted said they are touting a program in flux, but there will be lots of opposition until it hits the Secretary of State. He hopes information on the issue will hit the papers, adding that



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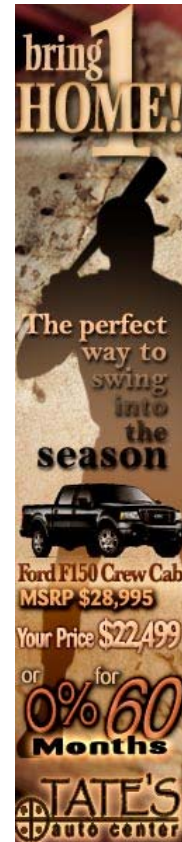
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some in the "mega corridor" between Phoenix and Tucson have been told the rural counties loved the proposed initiative.

"Few people will like the idea (the mega corridor) will get fancy freeways and trains while the rest of us ride on bumpy roads that are falling apart," he said.

The one percent additional state tax will limit municipalities' ability to raise local revenues through sales tax, since many of them have high rates already in effect.

When looking at the state road needs in Navajo County, Tenney suggested they needed to four-lane State Route 260 all the way from Heber to Show Low. Husted said priorities include SR 77 (from Holbrook to Show Low through Snowflake/Taylor) and SR 60.

"The question is how we can get around this initiative," he said. "Nothing is going to the rural counties. We shouldn't be upset. We should be insulted.

"This is a very soft issue to begin with - a one percent sales tax. The understanding of the TIME coalition is that it's not a done deal. The plan still needs to go to the state Board of Transportation. We think they will rubber stamp it, but there is a whole lot of opposition brewing."

"If we want to take a position, who do we address a letter to if not the board?" Supervisor Percy Deal asked.

Husted said they could still address the board. Supervisor Jesse Thompson said they needed to contact the area's transportation board representative.

"We are vehemently opposed to the proposed plan," Tenney said. "They take our money and only give us half of what we contributed."

The supervisors agreed to send letters opposing the plan to appropriate agencies including NACOG (Northern Arizona Council of Governments).

Supervisors were told rural communities have additional issues the proposal would severely impact including critical needs of local transportation networks and overcrowding in jails. The transportation study for the southern portions of Navajo and Apache Counties found more than \$620 million worth of critical needs.

"We have no way to generate this revenue unless, in the future, we are able to pass our own sales tax for public safety or transportation," Parsons stated in background material, "If the proposal is passed, it would eliminate any chances that we have of correcting these problems."

*Reach the reporter at lupre2@yahoo.com



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If we have to have a sales tax to raise needed funds, why not have a 1.5 cent sales tax in Maricopa, Pima and maybe Pinal Counties and a 0.5 cent sales tax in the rest of the counties with all the funds collected in the respective counties going back to the respective counties, then each is happy!? And the local governments can get the returned funds to work on all the local roads and other needed projects, like the jails for all the illegals caught, drug dealers, etc. How's them apples?

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The White Mountain Independent is a Kramer Publication published by White Mountain Publishing Co. each Tuesday and Friday.
The online edition is updated each Tuesday, Friday and for breaking news.

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